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Roundtable: Feminism and Islam: Exploring the Boundaries of Critique

Secular and Feminist Critiques of the Qur'an: Anti-Hermeneutics as Liberation?

Asma Barlas

Some years ago, I reviewed the work of four Muslim women who had interpreted Islam's scripture in a radical break with the Muslim juristic and exegetical tradition.[1] This 1,400-year-old tradition is normatively patriarchal and also projects an ideology of male supremacy onto the Qur'an because it gives men certain rights vis-à-vis women, especially in their roles as husbands. Although there are less than six such instances in some six thousand verses, they form the basis of both law and scriptural exegesis. In contrast to this heavy-handed focus on the so-called anti-women verses—some of which are no more than single words and lines—Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan, amina wadud, and I had sought to recuperate teachings that affirm the ontological and moral/ethical equality of women and men. Our intent was to show that the Qur'an's position on women cannot be delimited to the "anti-women" verses, which we had also reread as a way to illustrate that meaning is contingent on our own interpretive methods and choices. Thus, my peers had explored a range of connotations of words that exegetes take as having just one, like *daraba,* which they render "beat/strike." The verse in which it occurs is then read as allowing wife beating even though the root of the word, *d-r-b,* has more than a dozen meanings, including to "go away/separate." To us, the latter seemed more congruent with the Qur'an's emphasis on mutual love and contentment in marriage. In addition, some of us had interpreted the verses with reference to the contexts in which they were revealed. Thus, I had read them as having been responses on the Qur'an's part to its first audience, a

[1] For their helpful comments, I thank Ulises Mejias and Naeem Inayatullah. Asma Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 255–72.

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seventh-century tribal Arab patriarchy. However, since that patriarchy had vanished long ago, together with its attendant institutions of concubinage and slavery, I had argued that its modes of male authority could not be binding. Instead, I had reasoned that the Qur'an's foundational teachings about the nature of God as well as about human creation and moral agency should provide the framework for Muslim religious praxis. Finally, wadud and I had made two points about the Qur'an and patriarchy. She had argued that it "remains neutral" toward patriarchy,[2] whereas I held that its rejections of the patriarchal imaginary of God as father/male, and the fact that it makes no mention of sex or gender inequalities, signal an *anti*patriarchal episteme. I also objected to imputing a sexual bias to the Qur'an on the grounds that it is the speech of a just God who is beyond sex/gender, hence also beyond sexual partisanship.[3]

To our readings, Margot Badran came to give the name "Islamic feminism," which she defined as an approach that "derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, [and] seeks rights and justice for women and for men."[4] While this was an accurate description of our project, it ignored that wadud and I had openly resisted the name[5] and also papered over some of our theological and methodological differences. The label, however, has stuck, which means I find it hard to respond to critiques of my own work without also speaking on behalf of "Islamic feminism" since the two are now inextricably linked. The irony of this situation is compounded by the fact that the criticisms I had anticipated from so-called traditionalist Muslims have come, instead, from liberal, secular, and feminist.[6] More surprising still, they have offered the kinds of rebuttals traditionalists might have by reinscribing the Qur'an as an incurably patriarchal text that no amount of "textual manipulation" can rescue.[7] Some feminists dispute not only "the project of egalitarian interpretations" of the Qur'an as such but also our "commitment to equality."[8] In their hands, Islamic feminism then becomes a straw woman on which they cut their academic teeth but without taking it seriously. Not only are such critics disinterested in a liberatory hermeneutics of the Qur'an but some also now question its sacrality and want Muslims to stop treating it as a sacred text that has a sanctified relationship to God.

[2] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

[3] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

[4] Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?" 2002, http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/international/Islamic-Feminism-01.html.

[5] For why I do, see Asma Barlas, "Engaging Islamic Feminism," in *Islamic Feminism*, ed. Anitta Kynsilheto (Tampere, Finland: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2008), 15–24.

[6] By traditionalists, I mean those who adhere to the traditional view of the Qur'an as a patriarchal text. By secular, liberal, feminists, I mean those who self-identify as such or who are considered "progressive" even though many of them also view the Qur'an as a patriarchal text.

[7] Ayesha Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xx.

[8] Kecia Ali quoted in Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 142.

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Here, I focus on this anti-Qur'anic turn in the scholarship of some theorists who are also critics of Islamic feminism and some of whom use my reading of the Qur'an as a segue to impugn it. These include, most prominently, Ebrahim Moosa, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Kecia Ali, Raja Rhouni, and Aysha Hidayatullah. I am dismayed both by the uses to which they have put my work and by their own anti-theological, anti-hermeneutical, and anti-women bents. Accordingly, I respond to their critiques of Islamic feminism and the Qur'an in the first two sections of this essay and of my reading in the last with the intention of identifying the problems with this genre of scholarship. In so doing, I also hope to revive some interest in a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics.

"Feminist Edges of the Qur'an"

The most recent and, by all accounts, the most rigorous interlocutors of "feminist exegesis," as she calls our work, is Hidayatullah who argues that the Qur'an is an intractably patriarchal and sexist text. Or, as she puts it, inverting my claim that it is not responsible for how we read it, "the Qur'an *itself* must be held responsible for its sexist and harmful readings." She thus thinks it was "disingenuous" and "manipulative" of us to have argued that it can accommodate modern notions of sexual equality; if anything, this argument leads us to a "dead end" from which the only way out is to stop reinforcing "a form of Qur'anic authority that ultimately renders us passive readers of the text."[9] In fact, she continues, "we ought not to continue to appeal to and thus reinforce the authority of a text that cannot definitively support our demands for feminist justice." She then goes on to argue that if one starts with the premise that "God is just, and that the Qur'an is the word of God, so then the Qur'an must also be just," one will have to abandon one of these beliefs sooner or later. In her words, if "we cannot be sure that the text upholds the justice we seek, then we are left to question whether the Qur'an is really a divine text. If we do not question the divinity of the Qur'an, then we are left to question whether God is just." In her opinion, finally, embracing a "radical uncertainty" about both beliefs is what makes one a Muslim and a feminist.[10]

Hidayatullah is definitely honest for having come clean about her stance on the Qur'an, but I question her conceptual teleology that goes seamlessly from questioning our exegesis to questioning whether the Qur'an is God's word and whether God is just. In fact, I think it is an intellectual sleight of hand for her to use our failure to find equality in the Qur'an, a failure she herself constructs, to ask such questions. If our exegesis is as unreliable an indicator of the text's nature as she says it is, why use it as the *reason* to abandon the Qur'an or to trade her belief in God's justice for a tenuous "hope" in it?[11] That she does so

[9] Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 136, 174.
[10] Ibid., 193, 194.
[11] Ibid., 194.

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in the name of being a Muslim is even more troubling. Thus, while a feminist might well harbor uncertainties about God's justice or the Qur'an's sacrality if they fail to support her "demands," an observant Muslim never would, even if the Qur'an *were* ineluctably patriarchal. Nor would an observant Muslim pose a false theological paradox pitting God's justice against the sanctity of God's word because such a Muslim would take it as a given that God is just and God's speech is sacred and inerrant. For observant Muslims, the Qur'an's sanctity and authority do not depend on whether or not it supports our demands, or on how *often*, or even *if*, we appeal to it or on how we choose to read it. To believe in a God who speaks is *necessarily* to believe in God's speech. Clearly, "the Qur'an is not God; the word of God can never be God," as Moosa observes somewhat fatuously.[12] But they are inseparable since it is through God's word that we also learn about God's self-disclosure and will. For Hidayatullah to think this article of faith can be upended through secular reasoning reveals a lack of understanding of Islamic belief and theology. This may be why she can prescribe her own stance as a universal strategy for Muslim women without seeming to realize that the majority would reject it as a heresy.

Hidayatullah's hermeneutical approach is equally questionable. Her claim that the Qur'an is a patriarchal text merely repeats traditional views of it, and she did not need the detour through our exegesis in order to recycle it. Moreover, exposing the flaws of our exegesis does not make hers correct. After all, to uncover what one alleges is a lie is not the same as telling the truth oneself; conceivably, we could *all* be wrong! This is the sort of conundrum scriptural hermeneutics addresses by specifying the criteria for interpreting texts and for judging between the contextual legitimacy of different readings. However, she ignores these criteria, which include the hermeneutical principles that every text has an excess of meanings and no interpretation can exhaust them all, and that every text has multiple contexts and can always be recontextualized.

Though I have singled her out, Hidayatullah is not the only one who takes these positions; she is just the latest in a family tree that includes the four authors I listed earlier, whose entangled genealogies I will now briefly unravel.

Secular and Feminist Critiques

Moosa, the first in this group to critique us, feels it is "preferable to hear the Qur'an in its patriarchal voice" because "generations of Muslim scholars have correctly stated that the Qur'an advocates patriarchal norms, since that was the historical condition in which the Qur'an was revealed." (Actually, it is only in the last twenty years that some readers, mostly women, have applied the concept of patriarchy to it.) However, even as he insists that "outright patriarchy" is the Qur'an's "'textual' norm," he also says that those who buy into "the fiction that

[12] Ebrahim Moosa, "The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam," in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2003), 124.

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the text actually provides the norms, and we merely 'discover' the norms," are text fundamentalists. This is how he describes readers who look to the Qur'an for "authority" because, to him, this means they are treating it as a "sovereign, passive, non-interactive text." What they need to realize, he argues, is that "we 'make' the norms in conversation with the revelatory text." In spite of this nod to a liberatory hermeneutics, however, Moosa dismisses our efforts to do precisely that as "a hermeneutical acrobatics." As he says, "Muslim feminists make too much of a few verses of the Qur'an that suggest reciprocal rights and duties between unequal spouses and then hasten to suggest that the Qur'an advocates egalitarianism as a norm."[13] Ironically, this critique also applies to those, like Moosa, who call the Qur'an patriarchal on the basis of less than a dozen lines in a text of some eighty thousand words. However, like traditionalists, he also remains oblivious to his reductive view of the Qur'an.[14]

In a similar vein, Abu Zayd also depicts the Qur'an as patriarchal, although he faults classical jurists, modern reformers, and Islamic feminists for reading it as a text because this means they have adopted a "focal point that will always point to God."[15] In his view, dealing with the Qur'an "only as a text—implying a concept of author (i.e. God as divine author) . . . automatically implies that the Qur'an is at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter."[16] If his reasoning does not quite explain why having God as an author "automatically" makes the Qur'an susceptible to its readers' ideologies, it is meant to prove that a focal point that claims to be "universal—the irrevocable and the eternal truth," can only generate a "crisis of interpretation and counter-interpretation." Since, for Muslims, this crisis results from taking the Qur'an to be God's word per Abu Zayd, the only way to avert it is to "rethink" the Qur'an as a divine-human discourse not a sacred text. Rhouni echoes his view that the Qur'an is a "discourse involving divine and human communication rather than a divinely authored text that has been revealed to all humanity regardless of its context of production, or historicity."[17] Like Abu Zayd, she also wants Muslims to stop treating their "religious texts as repositories of truths, from which [to] retrieve an egalitarian Islam."[18] Finally, like him, she is also suspicious of any attempt to reread the Qur'an and depicts ours as a doublespeak "that reinterprets verses to invest them with a more modern and more egalitarian meaning, on the one hand, and that resorts to a historical and contextual reading when no progressive meaning

[13] Ibid., 124–25.

[14] For my critique of Moosa, see Asma Barlas, "'Believing Women' in Islam: Between Secular and Religious Politics and Theology," in *Re-Understanding Islam* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008).

[15] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 2006), 98.

[16] Ibid., 91.

[17] Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 260.

[18] Ibid., 272.

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can possibly be invented, on the other hand."[19] In effect, she thinks the standard hermeneutical practice of reading a text while also contextualizing it is some sort of a subterfuge. Having critiqued Rhouni and Abu Zayd's opinions at length elsewhere, I will make only one point.[20] Their insistence that Muslims should start treating the Qur'an as a discourse is a rather obvious attempt to secularize (desacralize) it. After all, discourses, no less than texts, are open to conflicting interpretations, and viewing the Qur'an as a discourse is unlikely to root out interpretive differences. But even if we *are* to treat it as a discourse, why not consider it a *sacred* discourse? Why deny its sacrality? Most important, why urge Muslims to do the same knowing (presumably) that a majority would consider this a blasphemy?

Finally, there is Ali who says the Qur'an is "thoroughly androcentric," and "the project of egalitarian interpretations . . . [is] fundamentally dishonest and ultimately futile."[21] She also disputes the usefulness of our methods, which she calls the "strategies of historical contextualization and principle-extraction."[22] Briefly, the first explains the historical contexts in which the Qur'an was revealed and the second derives principles from its teachings that are applicable today. For instance, in counseling modesty, the Qur'an refers to seventh-century clothes; taken literally, this would mean dressing like seventh-century women. However, if we focus on the principle of modesty, we are free to wear contemporary clothing. This may be an obvious point, but one arrives at it by reading "behind" and also "before" scripture; that is, by using the methods Ali rejects, as do Rhouni and Hidayatullah. Of course, if one rejects *all* hermeneutical practices, one can freeze the Qur'an in time and meaning, making it easier to argue that it cannot respond to the needs of Muslims today. Ali implicitly suggests this by alluding to "divine oversight" and by contrasting God's view of justice negatively with her own "egalitarian vision" of it.[23] She also argues, rather oddly, that instead of doing "paradigm-shifting scholarship," Muslim women are pursuing more "pragmatic" goals, such as legal reforms. She worries that, "in seeking to get things done, they may inadvertently shore up the authority of certain texts . . . thereby compromising their ability to do paradigm shifting work."[24] She does not explain what a paradigm shift entails, why rereading the Qur'an is not paradigm-shifting scholarship, or which texts she has in mind. Hidayatullah then takes up her mantle and tells women to stop appealing to the Qur'an in so many words.

[19] Ibid., 14.

[20] For a longer critique of all the authors whose work I have considered here, see Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women,"* 2nd ed. (forthcoming), chap. 8.

[21] Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 132, 133, 153.

[22] Kecia Ali, "Timeless Texts and Modern Morals," in *New Directions in Islamic Thought,* ed. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 90.

[23] Ali, "Timeless Texts," 90, and Ali, *Sexual Ethics*, 133.

[24] Kecia Ali, "Paradigms and Pragmatism," *Reformist Women Thinkers in the Islamic World*, Woodrow Wilson Center (Spring 2009), 26–27, emphasis added.

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Collectively, then, these authors make several questionable claims. First, like the traditionalists, they also assert that the Qur'an is an irrefutably patriarchal text that cannot be reread or recontextualized. Of course, insisting that a text is a text is a text and that the text in question is always already patriarchal says less about the text itself than it does about one's own methodology. On this note, second, like traditionalists, these critics also evince little knowledge of scriptural hermeneutics, which they often deride. However, unlike traditionalists, they challenge the Qur'an's "feminist exegesis" and its own status and authority, which then raises several other questions. For instance, why do those with an "egalitarian vision of gender justice" balk at the Qur'an's egalitarian exegesis or at our "commitment to equality"? And if we were being dishonest in applying modern concepts like sexual equality to the Qur'an, why do they themselves use terms like *androcentric*, *wife abuse*, *sexual hierarchy*, and so on, to describe it? Are these premodern concepts? What are likely to be the consequences not only for Muslim women but also for men of turning back the clock to the Qur'an's anti-women (patriarchal) exegesis? What stake do they have in *any* exegesis of the Qur'an when they reject its own sacrality or authority? How can those who are urging Muslims to stop looking to the Qur'an then be appealing to tradition to justify its patriarchal exegesis? Why do they treat tradition as being more authoritative than the Qur'an? Then, too, why the aversion to interpretive pluralism and where does it exist in Muslim societies? From a theological perspective, what would Islam become if we were to "rethink" the Qur'an as a part-human discourse and, since most Muslims will reject this anyway, why do critics prescribe such a strategy? And if they do not care about the beliefs of the majority, whom are they addressing and to what ends?

The last question may be the easiest to answer if one agrees with Saba Mahmood's critique of the political exertions of the United States to "reform and reshape Islam." Her two main points are that secularism today produces a "religious subject who is compatible with the rationality and exercise of liberal political rule," and that US policy makers have found a "powerful partner in secular liberal Muslim reformers"—like Abu Zayd—who also want this kind of secularism in Muslim societies.[25] To take this position is not to say that all critics of the Qur'an are complicit in the United States' attempted conversion project. It is only to say that there is a relationship between scriptural exegesis and the contexts in which it is produced. We are living at a time of ideological conflicts between Western secularism and Islam and of deadly US wars with Muslims. This is why what critics of the Qur'an say matters beyond their own inner circles, especially when they issue blanket prescriptions on behalf of and for Muslims.

On this note, finally, I want to revisit my own reading of the Qur'an in dialogue with Hidayatullah's criticisms of it.

[25] Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323–47, quotations on 344 and 340.

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"Believing Women" in Islam, Redux

At stake for me in how the Qur'an is read are not simply women's rights but also Muslim conceptions of God. For instance, when Muslims think and speak of God in masculinist terms and as favoring men, it is not just that men feel empowered, it is also that this way of thinking and speaking about God violates God's self-disclosure in the Qur'an. Thus, when we look to the Qur'an, we find a transcendent God who is beyond our understanding but also an immanent God who is closer to us than our jugular veins, a God who does not beget, is not begotten, and is incomparable, since "there is none like unto God" (112:4). The Qur'an thus forbids using similitude for God, which suggests that its own references to God as "He" are simply linguistic conventions. The Qur'an not only repudiates images of God as father/male but also affirms that God created men and women from the same self (*nafs*), made them vice-regents on earth (*khalifa*), charged them to be each other's guides (*awliya*), and will judge each *nafs* by the measure of *her* own endeavors in the end. The God of the Qur'an also does not transgress against the rights of another,[26] forbids compulsion in religion, and is loving, patient, and subtle but also severe in reckoning. Yet mercy and forgiveness precede God's wrath. *This*, at a minimum, is the Creator Muslims are called on to worship, and this is the primary reason why I read this Creator's word as being liberating for women.

Another is that I read the Qur'an in light of my understanding of patriarchy, which I define as a mode of institutionalized male authority whose ideological impetus derives from representing God as male in its religious iterations and from using biological (sexual) differences between men and women to posit gender inequalities in its secular. It is in light of *this* definition that I call the Qur'an's episteme antipatriarchal. This is because not only does the Qur'an not patriarchalize God but it also does not teach that sexual differences make women and men unequal. To the contrary, it emphasizes their ontological equality, similarity, and equivalence. None of the "hierarchy verses," as Hidayatullah calls them, proclaims otherwise. The handful of references Muslims adduce on behalf of the idea that the Qur'an mandates sexual hierarchies—for example, God made men women's guardians (which is how they translate *qiwamah*), gave them a "degree" above women, and allowed them to strike a wife—are open to different interpretations. Besides, the "hierarchy verses" can be read historically, as speaking to the social and sexual realities of seventh-century Arabs. Even so, they do not intimate that only "men can, or should, be breadwinners, supporters of their households, initiators of sex," and nor do they give men the right "to ignore women's wishes or choices or to defeat their independence."[27]

[26] This is the meaning of divine justice. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran*, vol. 2 (Japan: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959).

[27] David F. Finn, e-mail, June 6, 2015.

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Hidayatullah replies to this argument by quoting Ali, that contextualizing the "hierarchy verses" may explain them but "cannot prevent their androcentric meanings." In other words, recognizing the patriarchal contexts in which the Qur'an was revealed "does not alleviate the impact of the text's content."[28] This is both true and untrue. It is true that the Qur'an's contents will always affect those who believe in it, regardless of how well we understand the contexts of its revelation. But I would argue that the effect of these verses also depends on the contexts in which they are read. At a time when men *did* exercise certain rights, such verses could have served as a check on them;[29] today, some feminists read them as evidence of "divine oversight." Since I believe in an omniscient God, I claim the oversight is ours in that we read these verses *as if* we are still living in the seventh century. Scriptures, however, encompass a horizon of ethical possibilities, and uncovering those that can be realized in our times *could* be our vocation. This might well include deriving a theory of sexual equality from the Qur'an's teachings.

Hidayatullah responds to my argument with several objections. First, she makes it seem like a contradiction for me to say that the Qur'an does not advance a theory of sexual equality but then to "still" insist that we can derive one from its teachings.[30] I see no contradiction here. Moreover, if most Muslims feel no compunction hanging an ontology of oppression onto single words in the text, why should others not be free to read the Qur'an on behalf of equality without being called to heel? Second, Hidayatullah points out that sexual hierarchy coexists with ontological equality in the Qur'an. This is obvious. The Qur'an did recognize the existing sexual hierarchies of seventh-century Arabia but, and this is the crucial point, it did not *justify* these by linking them to a "hierarchy of being."[31] Hidayatullah, however, wants to establish that "functional inequality" is *compatible with* the Qur'an's affirmation of the ontological equality of women and men and, indeed, she makes the stronger claim that "the functional inequality of men and women in the Qur'an perhaps cannot exist *except as an effect of ontological inequality*." She calls this "a permanent difference of being."[32] In a series of steps, then, she flips the Qur'an's account of creation on its head, a move one can take seriously only if one dispenses with the Qur'anic account.

Last, Hidayatullah objects to my analysis of the Qur'an's stance on sex/gender. I had argued that the Qur'an does "not invest biological sex with content or meaning"—in other words, it "does not locate gender dimorphisms in sex." As such, it is hard to "theorize a determinate relationship between sex

[28] Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 133–34
[29] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 1999.
[30] Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges,* 151.
[31] Barlas, *"Believing Women,"* 138.
[32] Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges,* 171, emphasis added.

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and gender" from its teachings.[33] This was my take on wadud's claim that there is no concept of gendered man or woman in the Qur'an. To this, Hidayatullah responds that feminist exegetes "have ignored . . . gender essentialisms, binaries, and social construction" and "appear to use 'gender' as a synonym for 'women,' neglecting to address the male gender or the 'queering' of gender."[34] This is a baffling comeback because if there is no clear-cut view of gender in the Qur'an, then discussing gender essentialisms and so on, becomes moot. I should also note that I did not argue, as she says, that the Qur'an "compensates women for their biological function as child-bearers by advising men to play some supportive role for them" (this may be wadud's position). Hidayatullah interprets this role to be male guardianship (*qiwamah*) and goes on to argue that if wadud and I are correct, then "it is *not* in fact true that the Qur'an never associates sex with a specific division of labor." Rather, the role of *qiwamah* "follows directly from a biological difference the Qur'an recognizes between men and women (i.e., the ability or inability to bear children)."[35] The short answer to this argument is that neither the *qiwamah* verse (4:34) nor any other ties *qiwamah* to childbearing.

In conclusion, I appreciate Hidayatullah's serious engagement with my premises. It is another matter that she often does not get my arguments right, fails to understand certain concepts, attributes claims to me I did not make, or relies on some "textual manipulations" in order, it would seem, to refute "feminist exegesis" at all costs. I also find her view of scriptural hermeneutics and what it means to be a religious feminist perplexing, particularly because she begins her book by praising two eminent feminist theologians, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Judith Plaskow, for rereading their own ostensibly patriarchal scriptures, the Bible and the Torah, respectively. To take such scholars as her role models while also pledging to do the "more complicated work" on the Qur'an Hidayatullah says we never did,[36] suggested that she would improve on ours. Instead, all she did in the end was to urge Muslim women to close its cover.

I am, consequently, unsure what our dialogue can tell readers of the Qur'an other than that how we read scripture eventually has to do with faith and that faith is inviolably personal. For me, it inheres in the call to submit (islam) to God, *al-Haqq*, the Truth, and it is this process of submission that draws me to try and read the Qur'an in ever better ways. If this is not one's starting point, however, no exegesis of the Qur'an, no matter how good, can suffice because no exegesis can matter more than the scripture itself. This is why my critics and I are unlikely to persuade one another and also why we are talking to different audiences. Those who share the persuasions of the authors I have discussed

[33] Barlas, *"Believing Women,"* 165–66.
[34] Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 129.
[35] Ibid., 156.
[36] Ibid., 145.

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will find an able guide in Hidayatullah; conversely, those who are seeking God outside a patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'an may find some small openings in mine. Or, so I hope.

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On Critique and Careful Reading

Kecia Ali

Feminist theorist bell hooks notes that scholars sometimes hesitate to criticize colleagues' work, fearing that their criticisms will be received as personal attacks rather than as invitations to deepen and improve scholarship.[1] Given this tendency toward self-silencing, I am heartened by recent rigorous engagements with gender-egalitarian, woman-friendly, and feminist interpretations of the Qur'an. One of the most important contributions Raja Rhouni and Aysha Hidayatullah make in their books is to engage systematically and critically with the writings of predecessors and peers.[2] In her impassioned critique of the critics published in this issue, Asma Barlas, whose "*Believing Women" in Islam* was a germinal contribution to the field, continues in this vein. I welcome her contribution even as I am troubled by some of her interpretive maneuvers.

A necessary preface: though my primary field of interest and expertise is Islamic jurisprudence not Qur'anic exegesis, I sometimes write and often teach about the Qur'an. I regularly assign work by Barlas, including her overview of amina wadud's interpretation, the chapter in *"Believing Women"* where she decimates any sacralization of fatherhood, and—separate from her work on

[1] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 114.

[2] Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); and Aysha Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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